A TRADITIONAL HISTORY OF
THE GUSII OF WESTERN KENYA
FROM C.A.D. 1500-1914.

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SUMMARY

This study examines the pre-colonial history of the Gusii people during the period 1500-1914. While attention is mainly paid both to migrations and settlement, an attempt has been made to illuminate Gusii social, political, military and economic institutions. Additionally, the study ushers Gusii traditional history into the Twentieth Century, with the examination of Gusii reaction to the setting up of British Administration in their country.

The first chapter surveys the origin of the people in relation to the wider Bantu speaking family and their migration into East Africa. In particular, special attention is paid to those Bantu speaking groups who are claimed in Gusii traditions to have been originally the same people as the Gusii, as well as to those with whom the Gusii are linguistically related.

The second chapter deals with the migration of the Gusii from around Mount Elgon, about the middle of the 16th Century, to their settlement at Kano, in present day Kisumu District of Nyanza. This period, which extends to about 1760, can be divided into two phases. The first phase saw the settlement by the Gusii at Got Ramogi, in Yimbo Location of Siaya District. It was here that the first wave of Luo migrants into West Kenya came into contact with them for the first time. After a period of hostility, and with further arrival of more Luo people – who were migrating from Southern Sudan – the Gusii were forced to migrate to the area of present day Kisumu Location in Kisumu District. It was here, according to Gusii traditions, that the group divided into two, due to famine, one wing moving northwards to become the Logoli, and the remaining group migrating southwards into Kano Plains, to become the Gusii.
The second phase of the chapter focuses on the evolution of Gusii Society from about 1600 to 1760 in Kano Plains. Special attention is paid to clan formation, the emergence of the various divisions and the adoption of sub-tribal totems.

In the third chapter the reason for the migration of the Gusii from Kano Plains, their contact and wars with the Maasai and Kipsigis, and the first phase of their settlement on the north-eastern part of Gusii Highlands - by Kitutu, North Mugirango and Nyaribari sections - are discussed. In addition, traditional histories of both the Maasai and Kipsigis - Gusii's "hostile" Paranilotic neighbours - are briefly examined, for the activities of these people in subsequent years, until the arrival of the British, had a tremendous impact not only on the lives of the Gusii people, but also on the nature and pattern of Gusii settlement on the Highlands.

The fourth chapter continues with the theme of the third chapter. It concentrates on the occupation of the lower western section of Gusii Highlands by the Wanjare, South Mugirango, Majoge and Bassi sections. A brief history of the evolution of the Luo is attempted since the western Gusii sections, throughout most of the 19th Century, had close economic and cultural ties with them.

The fifth chapter is a broad survey of Gusii environment, its rainfall, soils, temperatures, vegetation, and the effect of these on Gusii Society. Also included in this chapter is the examination of Gusii religious, political, economic and social life,
before the arrival of the British.

The sixth chapter, which is also the last chapter, deals with the period 1895 to 1914, and concentrates on the establishment of British Administration in Gusii land. Emphasis is laid on the initial contacts and the reaction of the Gusii to British colonialism.